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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000589

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KU

SUBJECT: FAILURE TO LAUNCH: INFIGHTING BOGS DOWN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AGAIN

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

¶1. (C) Infighting and attacks on ministers dominated the newly elected National Assembly's first working session, suggesting that the gridlock that has characterized Kuwait since 2006 likely will continue. Major issues such as the Amiri-decreed economic stimulus bill were not substantively addressed and MPs spent the bulk of the session bickering with each other and attacking the cabinet. The ministers of Defense, Interior, Housing and Development and Finance were accused of poor leadership, corruption and mismanagement. A motion to grill the Interior Minister filed on 8 June will be discussed at the Assembly's 23 June session. The newly elected female MPs made the most productive contributions of the week by submitting substantive questions to the government regarding the status of the much-anticipated development plan and securing the top seat on the Negative Phenomena Committee, which historically has been dominated by Islamists opposed to women's rights. End Summary.

First Things First: MPs Remind Each Other of their Grudges

¶2. (C) Much of the first regular session of the National Assembly was consumed on Tuesday by acrimonious quarreling between MPs. Assembly Speaker Jassem al-Khorafi, playing the role of an exasperated teacher attempting to control rowdy students, struggled to maintain order by cutting off the microphones of vociferous MPs and adjourning the session at one point to allow agitated legislators to calm down. Following the break, al-Khorafi instructed MPs to stop talking and to listen to what their colleagues were saying so that he would not have to repeat the comments before a vote could be taken. Several of the disputes illustrate the personal and sometimes frivolous nature of parliamentary life in Kuwait:

-- The session opened with a sectarian-tinged exchange between Shi'a MP Saleh Ashour and Salafist MP Khaled al-Sultan over oaths of office taken by MPs in the May 31 opening session of parliament. Shi'a complaints as made by Ashour decried the showcasing of piety by Islamist MPs as they uttered their oaths. Ashour took exception an address given by al-Sultan during the Assembly's opening session which Ashour implied was not inclusive of the Shi'a. A number of Sunni Islamist MPs challenged Ashour's comments by insisting that the speech represented a point of view held by of the majority of Kuwaitis. Firing back Islamist MPs charged Shi'a oath-takers with using Shi'a nuanced pronunciations in their pledges.

-- A dispute then erupted between MP Ahmad al-Saadoun and Chairman of the Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) Marzuk al-Ghanem over a point of order directing parliamentary committee engagement with relevant ministers. Al-Saadoun declared that the FAC had exceeded its brief

during the meeting by meeting directly with FM Dr. Mohammad Al Sabah to discuss relations with Iraq, even though 40 MPs attended the gathering. Chairman al-Ghanem took exception to the comment and his response became so heated that he was restrained by colleagues and Assembly Speaker al-Khorafi adjourned the session for a 15 minute cooling-off period. -- Later Rola Dashti, one of the newly elected female MPs, was accused of secretly holding dual Lebanese/Kuwaiti citizenship by MP Saadoun Hamad.

#### Attacking the Government: Picking up Where they Left Off

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**¶3.** (C) In an attempt to calm tensions between his colleagues, MP Khalal Dumaythiya joked Tuesday that MPs should stop attacking each other because the Assembly had enough to fight the government about. By Wednesday's session MPs seem to have gotten Dumaythiya's message and focused their energy on attacking the government and repeating accusations made during their campaigns that several ruling family members are not qualified to be Ministers:

-- Dhaifallah Bu Ramiya, one of the "escalation MPs", on Wednesday said First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Shaykh Jaber al-Mubarak Al Sabah and Interior Minister Jaber al-Khalid Al Sabah were not fit to lead and should not have been retained in the new government. Shaykh Jaber al-Khalid responded to the accusations by saying MPs could decide who became a minister when they were PM and the former general said MPs had no authority to discuss issues of national security to "settle personal scores".

-- Interior Minister Shaykh Jaber al-Khalid was the target of a number of attacks this week and tribal-Islamist MP Khalaf Dumaither on Tuesday called for his resignation. He will have

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a chance to defend himself at the June 23 Assembly against a grilling motion filed last week by MP Musallam al-Barrak. Local press indicates the Interior Minister plans to rebut Barrak's accusations that the ministry installed closed circuit cameras outside the Assembly to spy on MPs, misused public funds, violated laws related to public tenders, and impaired the electoral process by refusing to arrest an Assembly candidate accused of attempting to buy votes.

Several Kuwaiti legal scholars have stated in recent days that the request is illegitimate because all of the alleged violations took place under the previous government, but the Constitutional Court is unlikely to void the request.

-- Also Wednesday Bu Ramiya submitted to MinDef Shaykh Jaber al-Mubarak questions regarding procurement contracts for military equipment including F-18s and Russian armored vehicles. Bu Ramiya asked the DM why Kuwait spends billions of dollars to buy foreign military equipment, but lacks the necessary spare parts to maintain them. He also cast doubt on reported plans to buy French-made jets. Finally, he accused the MinDef of provoking the Iraqis by stating publicly that the army stood ready to "foil any attack on Kuwait".

-- Islamist MP Adel al-Saraawi on Tuesday challenged Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Development and Minister of State for Housing and Development Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahd Al Sabah to submit a report concerning misappropriation funds during a soccer tournament run by the DPM.

-- Finance Minister Mustafa al-Shimali was accused of forgery and of wasting billions of dollars by not negotiating agreements with terms favorable to Kuwait by MP Khaled al-Tahous in an attack meant to undermine the Amiri-decreed financial stimulus package. The Assembly voted to hold a special session next week to discuss the package, which, by law should have been addressed in the Assembly's first session in order to remain in effect.

#### Initial Victories for Women MPs

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**¶4.** (C) Though they were the target of some Islamist attacks, the newly elected female MPs lost no time in making their presence felt. In contrast to the thinly veiled insults hurled by their peers, MP Dr. Aseel al-Awadi submitted the first serious questions to the government in years, seeking

to clarify when the GOK's development plan will be unveiled and why it has been delayed. She also asked the cabinet to submit timetables for large development projects touted by the government as drivers of future economic diversification and development. Liberal MP Rola Dashti scored an upset victory much to the chagrin of her Salafist peers on Tuesday, gaining the highest number of votes of any candidate for the Negative Phenomena Committee, the Kuwaiti version of Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Her new role as rapporteur, as well as the election of fellow Shi'a MPs Faisal al-Dwaisan and Hassan Jowhar to the five member committee, led to exclusion of committee regulars Islamists Walid al-Tabtabaie and Mohammad Hayef, though MP Salem al-Namlan later resigned from the committee to allow Hayef to join.

Comment

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¶5. (C) The motion to grill Shaykh Jaber al-Khalid is a litmus test to determine the strength of the new cabinet. The Interior Minister, who accepted his reappointment reluctantly and whose wife passed away on May 8, could very easily choose to bow out and avoid the hassle of interpellation. This scenario might open the way for Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahd to gain the Interior portfolio he has coveted for years. The DPM continues to cultivate popular support, as was witnessed first hand by PolOff at a lively celebration hosted for Shaykh Ahmad al-Fahd by the influential Ajmi tribe on Tuesday night. However, Shaykh Jaber al-Khalid's rebuttal of the accusations, with full government support--which some press reports suggest could happen--would indicate the cabinet will no longer stand for frivolous attacks. Noticeably absent from all of the action was Prime Minister Naser al-Mohammad Al Sabah, who has yet to play his hand. Whether he hopes to play an apolitical role in the new government or will allow others bear the brunt of the Assembly's wrath remains to be seen.

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